

Public support for peacebuilding

Attitudes towards peacebuilding and dialogue
with armed groups in the US, UK and Germany

September 2017



Alliance for
Peacebuilding

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Methodology

This reports presents the findings of national surveys conducted in the United Kingdom, United States and Germany in June and July 2017. For the UK, Populus interviewed a random sample of 2,214 adults aged 18+ from an online panel between 23 and 25 June 2017. Within the UK sample a slightly higher number of adults were interviewed in Northern Ireland (205) in relation to other geographic areas. In the US Populus interviewed a random sample of 1,052 adults aged 18+ between 7 and 16 July. For Germany, Populus interviewed a random sample of 1,041 adults aged 18+ between 19 and 21 July. Surveys were conducted across the country and the results have been weighted to the profile of all adults. Populus is a founder member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules. Further information on the methodology at www.populus.co.uk.

Acknowledgements and disclaimers

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The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of Conciliation Resources and the Alliance for Peacebuilding.

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Introduction

In June and July, 2017, Conciliation Resources and the Alliance for Peacebuilding conducted the first national surveys on peacebuilding in the United States, United Kingdom, and the Federal Republic of Germany. The survey demonstrated widespread support for peacebuilding efforts across all three countries.

Within the United States (US) we found very similar perspectives from both Republicans and Democrats – a remarkable finding given the current polarization around so many political issues. The results were notable not only for the degree of support for governmentally-led peacebuilding efforts, but for the nuanced understanding the respondents demonstrated around peacebuilding approaches more generally. The findings are particularly relevant to the US during a time of shifting policy on national security and increasing reliance on military approaches to complex global issues.

1. There is strong support for peacebuilding across the political spectrum in the United States
2. Americans hold a nuanced view and understanding of peacebuilding
3. A majority of respondents were able to agree on when the US should become involved in peacebuilding efforts
4. There was strong support for the US Government – as well as the United Nations (UN) – to engage with armed groups

For Americans and peacebuilding organizations based in the US, this survey has three primary implications that build on one another:

- First, as fragmentary as these data are, they suggest that Americans are not as divided on peacebuilding issues as they are on other issues in the news today, like healthcare and gun control.¹ It behooves our advocacy work to focus on those issues in which common ground can be built.
- Second, these data suggest that we could and should forge broader coalitions that span what often feel like unbridgeable ideological divides – at least in the US. In the national security arena,

organizations like the American Enterprise Institute and the CATO Institute have recently published reports on terrorism and violent extremism whose analyses overlap considerably with those issued by Alliance for Peacebuilding members. In short, these data suggest that there would be broader, public support for cooperative efforts by the kinds of organizations listed in this paragraph – and more.

- Finally, even given these data, we cannot argue that the American public is highly informed or deeply engaged in policy making discussions about peacebuilding. That said, these data suggest that there is a potentially large and fertile audience for peacebuilding if we develop concrete ways for people across the US to contribute to the hopeful, safer, and more dignified world their survey responses spoke about.

The findings are leading the Alliance for Peacebuilding to redouble their efforts in two main areas:

- Building broader coalitions to support peacebuilding and efforts on related issues such as climate change.
- Expanding “outward facing” strategies designed to deepen the public’s understanding of peacebuilding and to engage average citizens in peacebuilding activities at home as well as abroad.

Key findings

1. There is strong public support for greater investment in peacebuilding.
2. The public knows what peacebuilding is.
3. There is strong support for international organizations like the UN (and US, UK and German governments) to engage with armed groups and proscribed terrorist organizations to further peace.
4. People feel positively about their respective governments playing a key role in negotiating peace between or with armed groups.

1. Hook, Janet. “Political Divisions in U.S. Are Widening, Long-Lasting, Poll Shows” Wall Street Journal, September 6, 2017

Background

The need for sustained investment by a wide range of people, governments, and international institutions in efforts to end violent conflict and build peace is clear.

Half the world's poor live in countries affected by conflict, fragility and violence. The majority of the reported 20 million refugees worldwide are fleeing conflict. Conflicts drive 80 percent of humanitarian needs and reduce gross domestic product by two percentage points per year, on average. Today's famines in Yemen, South Sudan, Somalia and north-eastern Nigeria, affecting millions of people, are a result of violent conflict fuelled by a complex system of factors.

What has been less obvious is the degree to which the public in our own societies understand and support peacebuilding as an approach to address conflict, and particularly when it comes to one of the essential, but most sensitive activities involved: dialogue with armed groups who use violence to pursue their objectives.

Why understanding public attitudes matters

Finding out what the public thinks is important, firstly, for governments, international institutions and NGOs working for peace. Peacebuilding tends to be an invisible sub-sector of international development, which is already struggling for resources against other priorities and media and public skepticism. With a deeper understanding of the public's existing knowledge and opinions on these issues, governments, international institutions, and NGOs can build support for peacebuilding initiatives.

Secondly, protracted conflicts are known to be fertile ground for groups pursuing radical political, ideological or religious interests. To deal with their complex political, social and economic causes and drivers, protracted conflicts require long-term efforts from grassroots to the international level. Yet, too often, such efforts are overtaken or undermined by the need to respond to crises, when security, counter-terrorism and military measures are often a first resort. Knowing what the public understands peacebuilding to be, and how strongly they feel about it, is essential information to feed into efforts to shift the emphasis from military solutions to long-term work to tackle the root causes of conflict and to prevent it happening.

Thirdly, public opinion has a bearing on the scope for one of the most sensitive areas of peacebuilding: activity aimed at encouraging armed groups to abandon violence and engage in a peace process. National governments and international institutions are understandably nervous about how a decision to engage with an armed group, if publicly known, will be perceived by their own populations. Will it be interpreted as legitimizing violence, as giving credibility to unreasonable or non-negotiable demands, or as a sign of weakness? When the armed group is officially cited by governments as a terrorist organization, anxiety levels increase. While engagement involves risks, it can often be a necessary strategy to achieve a positive and sustainable outcome, and the survey shows public understanding of this.

But this nervousness at an official level translates as risk aversion in the eyes of peacebuilders in international NGOs and on the ground, who navigate a complex web of rules and regulations in this area, or are obliged to second-guess the degree of political appetite for contact. It also leaves diplomacy and official peacemaking under-resourced, and official policy overly reliant on security and military solutions. Getting a sense of the level of public support for this work, and of who people feel should engage with armed groups and why, is crucial for understanding the room for maneuver for this essential component of peacebuilding.

The survey

This report presents and analyzes the findings of an online public opinion survey, which was commissioned by Conciliation Resources in the UK and Germany and by the Alliance for Peacebuilding in the US in June and July 2017. Questions were developed by Conciliation Resources with external advice and in consultation with Populus. In the UK 2,214 adults aged 18+ were interviewed; 1,052 in the US; and 1,041 in Germany. An equal number of men and women were interviewed. Within the UK, a slightly higher proportion of adults were interviewed in Northern Ireland in relation to other geographic areas in order to test the views of those with direct experience of violent conflict. Further information on methodology can be found at the start of this report.

Findings in detail

1. There is strong public support for greater investment in peacebuilding.

Respondents in each country were asked if they agreed with the following statements in relation to their national government:

Peacebuilding plays a vital role in ending violent conflicts around the world. In the [United States/United Kingdom/Germany] we should be investing more resources in this.

Support across countries

The results suggest an issue of largely universal appeal; UK, US and German governments, international institutions, and NGOs have a strong public mandate to maintain and increase investment in peacebuilding.

In the UK, 71 percent of respondents believed that peacebuilding plays a vital role in ending violent conflicts (only 5 percent disagreed), and 60 percent stated that the UK should be investing more in peacebuilding (10 percent disagreed). The responses were even higher in Germany, with 82 percent supporting the vital role of peacebuilding (only 4 percent disagreeing) and 70 percent believing Germany should allocate more financial resources to it. In the US, the public were asked to respond to both statements together: 74 percent of the public agreed that peacebuilding plays a vital role in ending conflicts and supported greater investment in it. Only 8 percent disagreed. This is a significant finding at a time when the US budget for peacebuilding is under threat.

Chart 1 Support for peacebuilding across countries

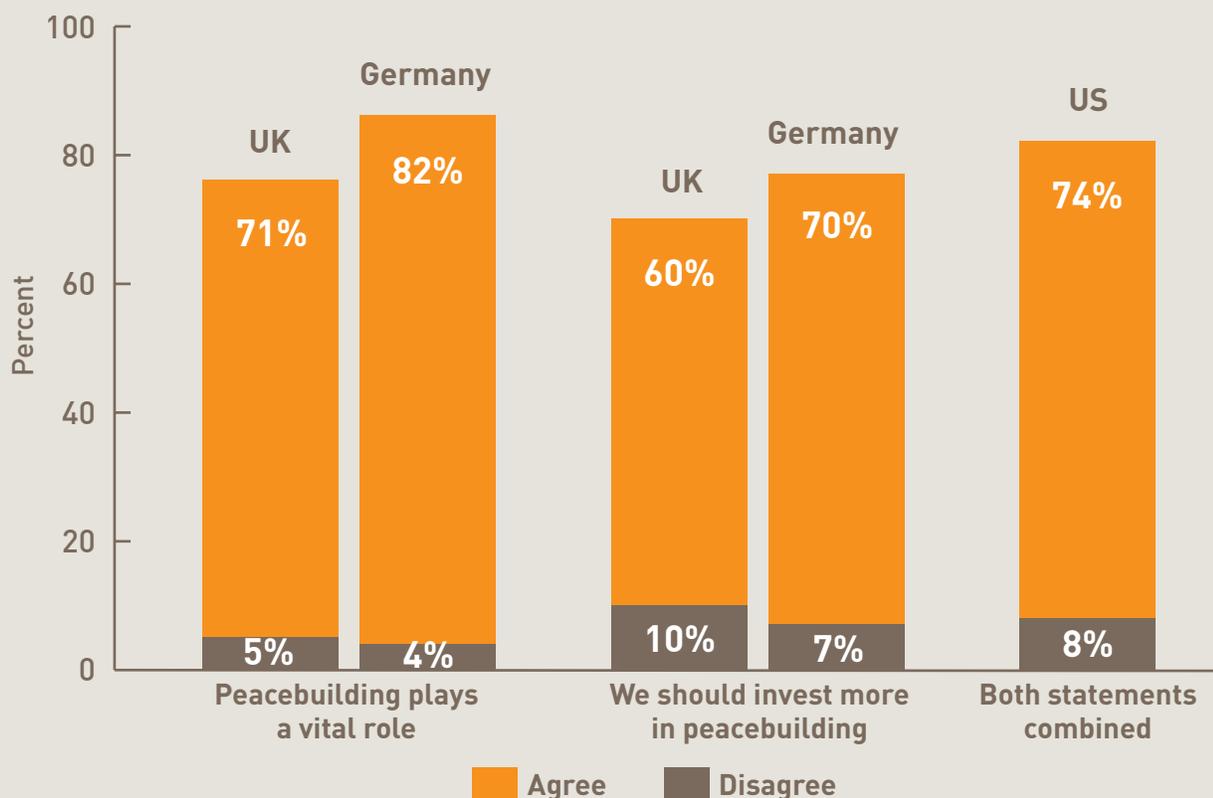
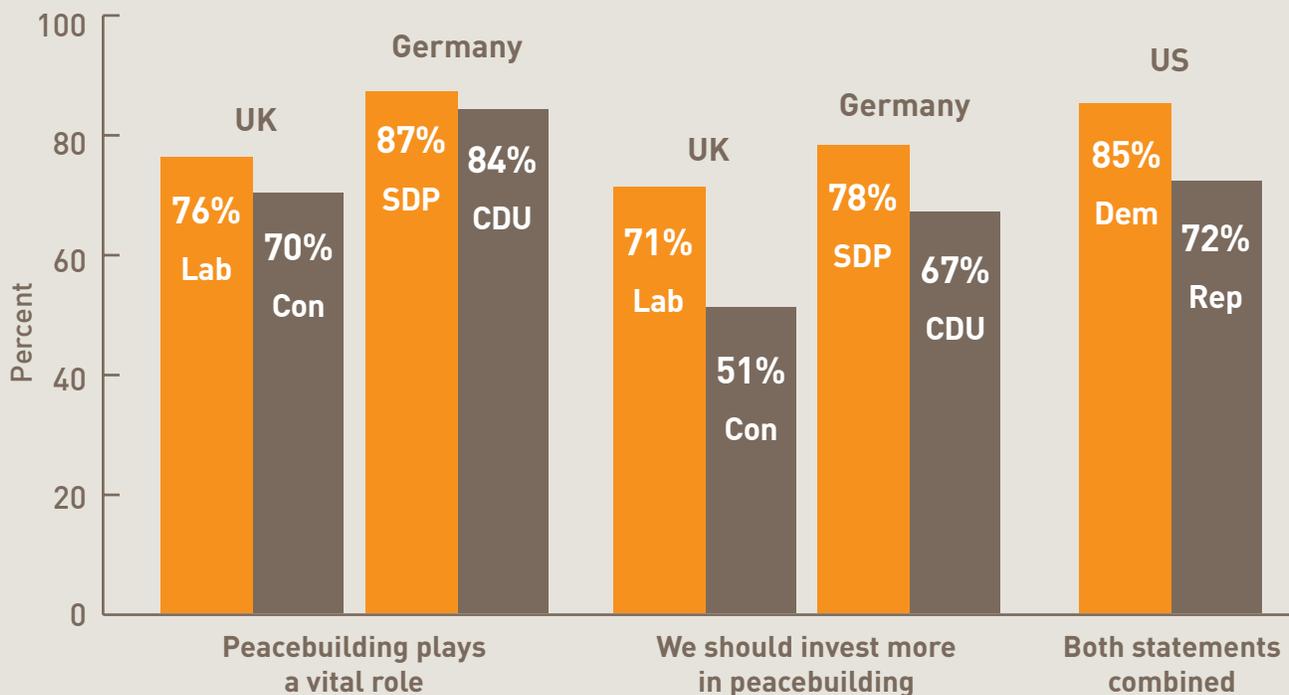


Chart 2 Support for peacebuilding across the political spectrum



Support across the political spectrum

The results revealed much greater parity of views than expected from across the political spectrum. The findings challenge common assumptions that ‘peacebuilding’ is too nuanced a term for people to support, and that it has significantly greater appeal to those on the political left. In the US in particular, there were high levels of support from both Democrats and Republicans (85 percent to 72 percent respectively).

In the UK, where the two statements were tested separately, the results revealed greater difference between Labour and Conservative supporters on the second statement: 76 percent of Labour supporters agreed that peacebuilding plays a vital role in ending violent conflicts, and 71 percent supported greater investment of resources in it; the results for Conservative supporters were 70 and 51 percent, respectively. Similarly, in Germany, of those who identify with the center-left Social Democratic Party, 87 percent agreed with the vital role of peacebuilding, and 78 percent supported greater investment in it; the results for the center-right Christian Democratic Union were 84 percent and 67 percent respectively. There was strong support for peacebuilding across different age and gender groups.

Justifications for support

We asked people for their views on the main justifications for their respective countries’ involvement in peacebuilding. Respondents were presented with a range of arguments and asked the extent to which they personally agreed or disagreed with each.

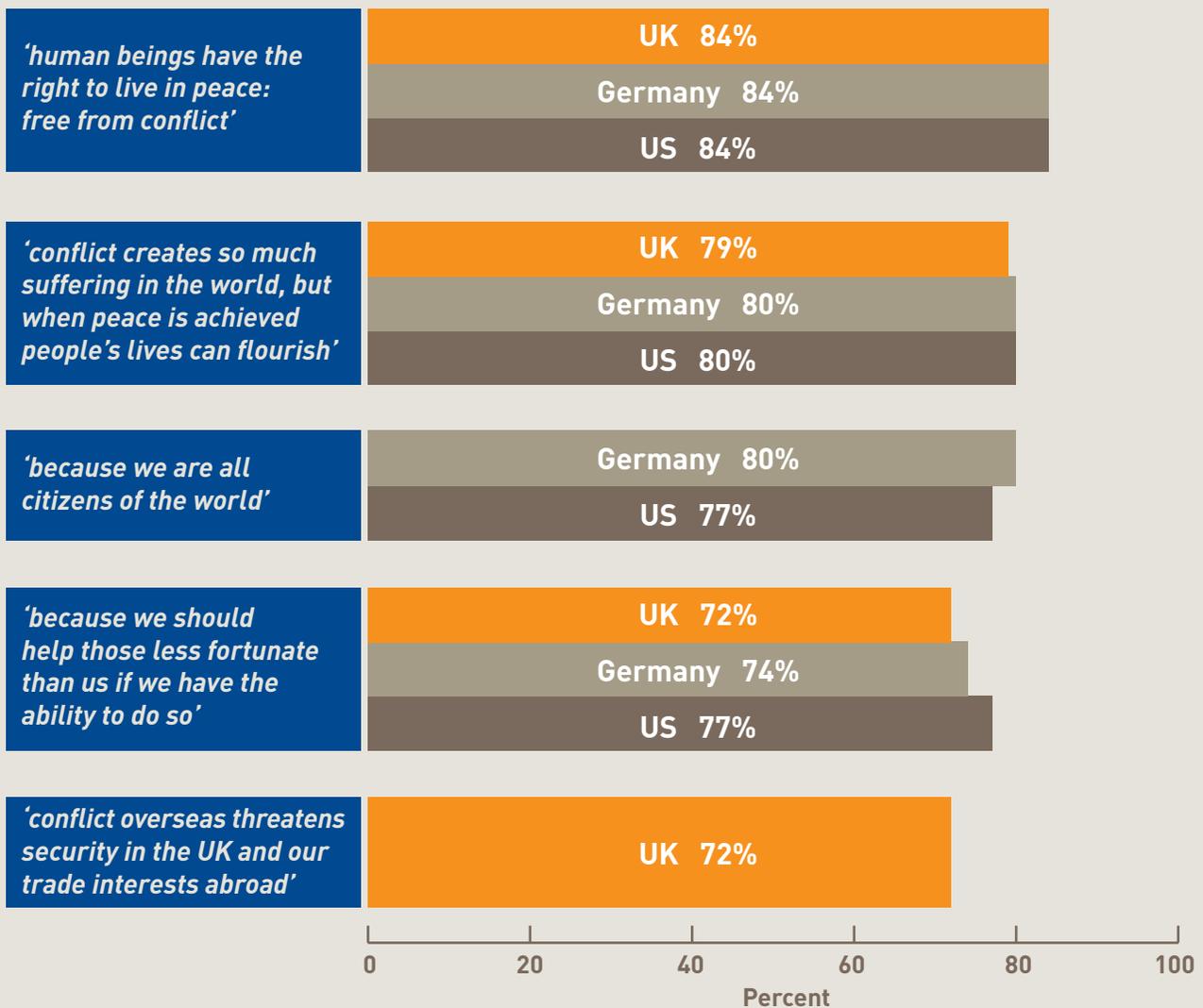
The majority of respondents selected moral reasons, and in particular human rights, as the main justifications. Across all three countries 84 percent of people believed that the primary justification for peacebuilding is that ‘human beings have the right to live in peace: free from conflict’. In the US, this statement was supported by 81 percent of those who identify with the Republican Party and by 92 percent of those who support the Democratic Party.

The second most popular reason selected was that ‘conflict creates so much suffering in the world, but when peace is achieved people’s lives can flourish’ – the response was 80 percent in the US and Germany, and 79 percent in the UK (for German respondents this answer tied in popularity with ‘because we are all citizens of the world’).

The joint third most popular justifications for peacebuilding in the US were: 'because we are all citizens of the world' and 'because we should help those less fortunate than us if we have the ability to do so' (77 percent). The latter justification was also the third most popular selection for German respondents (74 percent). In the UK, the third most

selected reason was 'because we should help those less fortunate than us if we have the ability to do so' (72 percent). This tied in popularity with the argument that 'conflict overseas threatens security in the UK and our trade interests abroad'. There were few variations between political affiliations or across age and gender groups.

Chart 3 Top four justifications for peacebuilding support



2. People know what peacebuilding is.

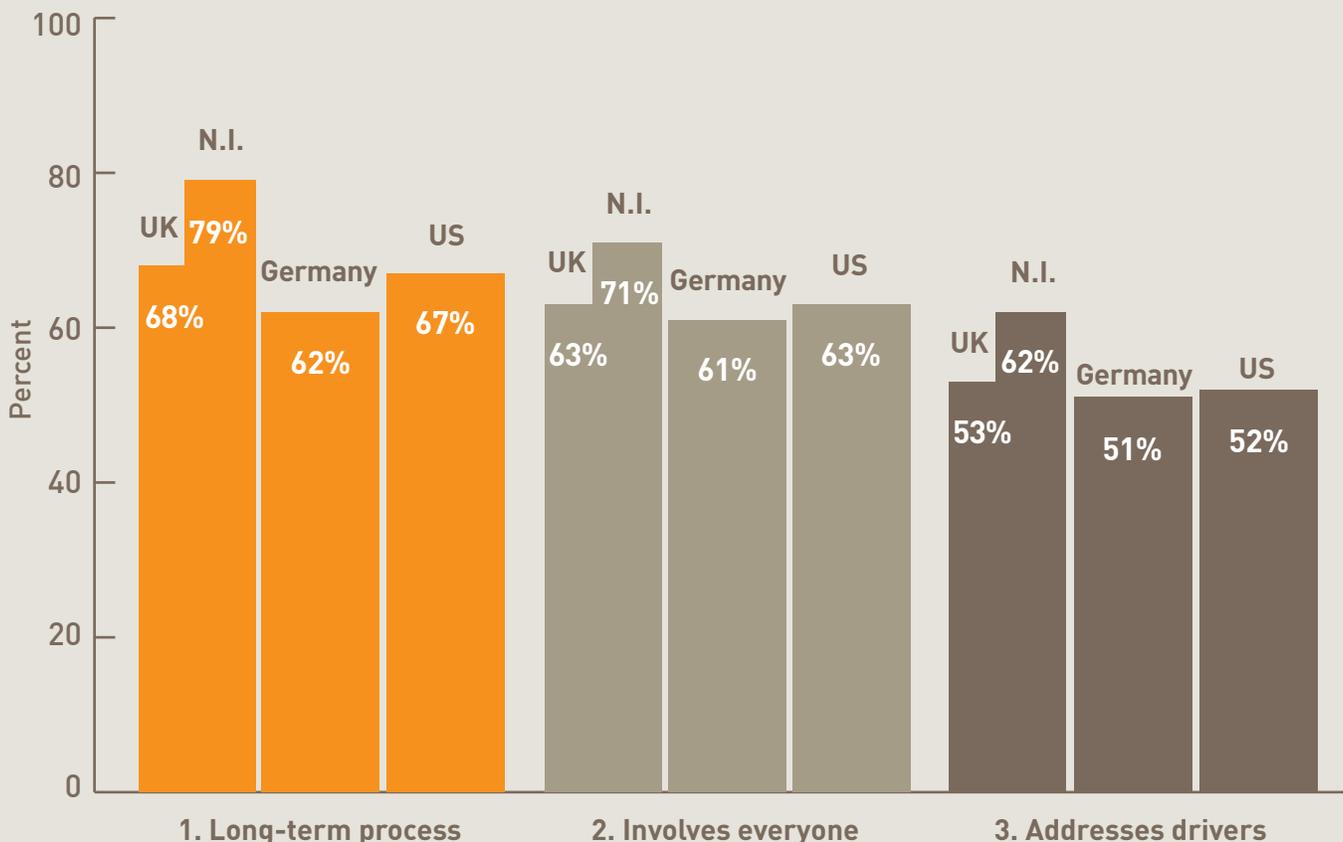
To test levels of understanding of what peacebuilding is and involves, the survey asked half the respondents to select up to three statements that best describe 'peacebuilding'. To test whether perceptions change in response to different terms used, or whether one term is better understood than another, the other half of the respondents were asked to select up to three statements from the same list that best describes 'conflict resolution' (see alternative statements in Box A). The survey also tested the public's level of confidence in their responses.

For both peacebuilding and conflict resolution, in the US, UK and Germany the three descriptions mentioned by a majority of respondents reflected what practitioners would consider to be key principles and core values of peacebuilding.

Respondents displayed high levels of confidence in stating that peacebuilding:

- 1. Is the long-term process of rebuilding relationships, changing attitudes and establishing fairer institutions**
(UK: 68 percent; US: 67 percent; Germany: 62 percent);
- 2. Involves everyone from communities to governments working to end fighting and prevent the recurrence of violence**
(UK: 63 percent; US: 63 percent; Germany: 61 percent);
- 3. Involves understanding and addressing the underlying drivers of conflict, not its symptoms**
(UK: 53 percent; US: 52 percent; Germany: 51 percent).

Chart 4 What is peacebuilding?



Interestingly, across the three countries those over 65 years old were much more likely to select these three statements than respondents in younger age brackets. In the US, women were much more likely than men to select the first two statements about long-term relationship building and the inclusive nature of peacebuilding (73 percent of women compared to 60 percent of men for the first statement; 71 percent of women compared to 55 percent of men for the second).

The results also revealed that framing the activity as 'conflict resolution' made marginal difference to the responses: in the US this resulted in a slightly higher number of people seeing conflict resolution as a process involving everyone (65 percent) than those who prioritized the description of it as a long-term process (64 percent). In the UK, the

descriptions altered the selection by up to 3 percent, but not the order of preference in respondents' selection. There were marginal variations across political lines. Women were slightly more likely than men to select the above statements, which were also more popular amongst older generations.

The results suggest that the high levels of support expressed for peacebuilding represents support for investment in long-term and holistic approaches, which address the drivers and causes of conflict. Rather than considering short-term, reactive and predominantly high-level activities, most people have a realistic sense of the time-scales and the types of effort involved in peacebuilding, and are supportive of it. This information is valuable in formulating more confident public communication strategies about peacebuilding work and its results.

BOX A: Respondents were asked to indicate which of the following descriptions best reflect 'peacebuilding' or 'conflict resolution':

1. ... involves understanding and addressing the underlying drivers of conflict, not its symptoms.
2. ... is the process of reconstruction after a war has ended.
3. ... involves everyone from communities to governments working to end fighting and prevent the recurrence of violence.
4. ... involves the military intervening to stop the different sides of a conflict from fighting.
5. ... involves providing aid to people who have been displaced or harmed by violent conflict.
6. ... is the long-term process of rebuilding relationships, changing attitudes and establishing fairer institutions.
7. ... involves diplomats brokering deals to end violent conflict.
8. ... is about ensuring justice for abuses committed during violent conflict and ensuring human rights.



3. There is strong support for international organizations like the UN, and the US, UK and German governments, to engage with armed groups to further peace.

The survey asked people whether their governments, international organizations, like the UN, and other informal institutions ('charities' and 'local communities') should engage in different ways with armed groups 'in order to seek the end to violent conflicts'. The different forms of engagement tested were: to 'talk with', 'mediate between', and 'negotiate with'.

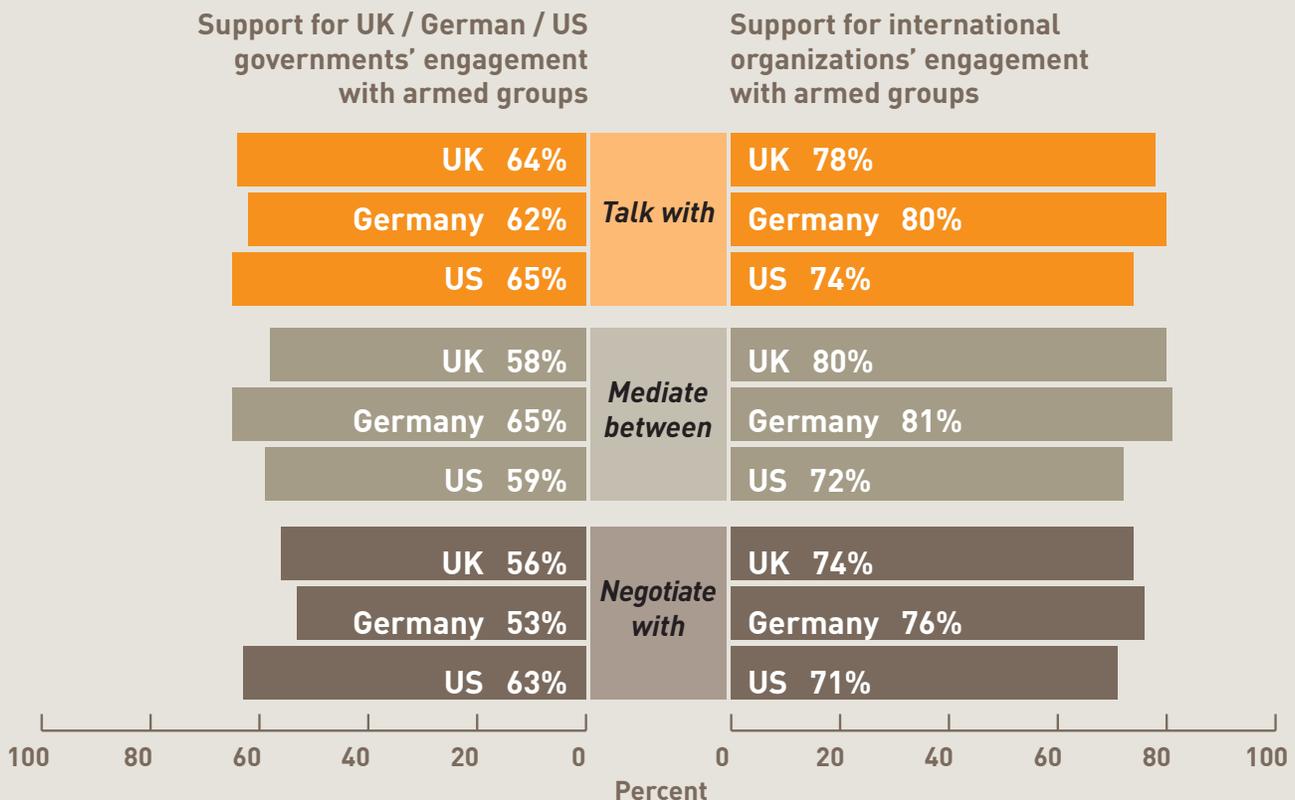
International organizations

The results in the US, UK and Germany revealed striking levels of support for international organizations, such as the UN, to engage with armed groups to further peace. People were particularly receptive to a message suggesting that the role of international organizations, like the

UN, should be to 'mediate between' armed groups (80 percent in the UK; 81 percent in Germany and 72 percent in the US). However, there was also a high level of support for other forms of engagement: 'talking with' (UK: 78 percent; Germany: 80 percent; US: 74 percent); and 'negotiating with' (UK: 74 percent; Germany: 76 percent; US: 71 percent).

There were variations among age and gender groups across the findings: in the UK, for example, younger age groups were generally less supportive of international organizations mediating between armed groups than older respondents, and less supportive of negotiations with armed groups (87 percent for over 65 year olds and 64 percent for 18-24 year olds). In the US, 81 percent of men and only 62 percent of women supported international organizations negotiating with armed groups.

Chart 5 Support for engagement with armed groups to further peace



Governments

In terms of government's role, the results indicated more support for governments using their influence in more informal ways: the option of 'talking with' armed groups receiving higher scores (65 percent in the US, 64 percent in the UK and 62 percent in Germany). Views were similar across political affiliations, with self-identified Democrats in the US and Labour supporters in the UK demonstrating slightly stronger support for their national governments (and the UN) 'talking with' armed groups, compared to Republicans and Conservatives, respectively.

Charities

The results showed the public was more neutral about 'charities' talking with armed groups (UK: 48 percent; US: 55 percent; Germany: 48 percent), and the results showed lower support for their involvement in 'mediating between' and 'negotiating with' armed groups. These results are perhaps to be expected given the type of activity the public typically associates with 'charities' (or 'non-profit organizations'), such as the provision of local services and local associations. While most NGOs have charitable status, and are as such charities, they are primarily organizations operating independently of government and often with a national or international remit. Some peacebuilding NGOs are involved in supporting sensitive mediation work with armed groups.² The findings suggest that we need a better understanding of the public's knowledge of and attitudes to the work of charities/NGOs in this domain, if we wish to demonstrate the nature of and need for it.

Local communities

The survey also explored support for local communities' engagement with armed groups to further peace, given the crucial roles they can play in pioneering peace talks. Levels of support were generally higher for local communities than for charities; respondents in Germany expressed particularly high support for local communities: 'talking' received 77 percent support and 'mediating between' received 73 percent (in the UK this was 56 and 52 percent, respectively, and in the US 56 percent for both).

The 'T' word

Given the emotive power of the 'terrorism' and 'terrorist' labels, and their liberal use by the media and political actors, we tested whether and how the public responds to the idea of engagement when an armed group is officially listed by governments as a terrorist organization, giving recent examples of when this had happened. The responses were surprisingly supportive.

Respondents in each country were asked whether their governments, international organizations, like the UN, and other institutions should be able to engage in different ways with proscribed terrorist organizations in order to seek an end to violent conflicts. Once again, the different forms of engagement tested were to 'talk with,' 'mediate between,' and 'negotiate with'.

Respondents were presented with the following context statement:

Peacebuilders play a role in reducing deaths and ending violence in communities affected by conflict, by helping to mediate with and between groups involved in violence. For example, helping loyalist and republican groups to put down arms and reach peace in Northern Ireland, and supporting conversations leading to a peace agreement between guerrillas and the Government in Colombia.

The UN, the EU and national governments, including the [UK/German/US Governments], officially identify some armed groups as 'proscribed terrorist organizations' because they are proven to have a connection to terrorist activity. Armed groups in Northern Ireland and Colombia were 'proscribed', for example. Proscribing an armed group can affect interaction with the group, including peacebuilding activities.

2. For the purposes of the survey, the term 'charity' was tested in the UK and US as it was viewed as a term more familiar to the public than 'NGO'. In Germany, the term 'Wohltätigkeitsorganisationen' was used.

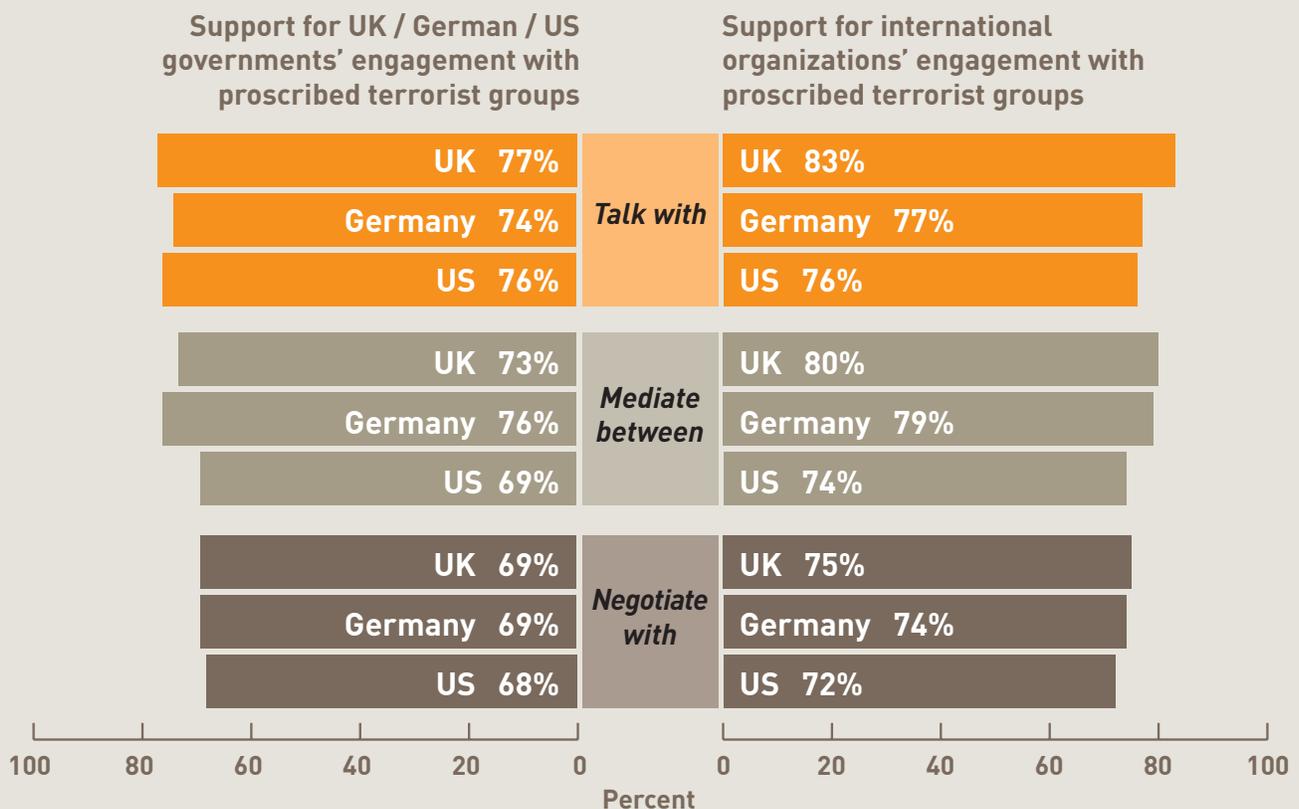
The findings showed that a significant majority of the UK public believes that international organizations, like the UN, and governments have a role in engaging with proscribed terrorist groups in the pursuit of peace. In the UK, a significant majority (83 percent) thought that international organizations like the UN should 'talk with' proscribed terrorist organizations, while 77 percent felt that governments should do so. This was closely matched by support for the UN in 'mediating between' proscribed groups (80 percent) and for governments to do so (73 percent). Furthermore, 75 percent of UK respondents believed the UN should 'negotiate with' proscribed groups (69 percent for governments).

Similarly high levels of support were revealed in the US and Germany surveys. In the US survey, 76 percent of respondents thought that the UN

and the US Government should talk with proscribed terrorist groups. Seventy-four percent favored the UN and 69 percent favored governments like the US mediating between terrorist groups. In Germany, 79 percent of people thought the UN should mediate between terrorist groups (against 76 percent for the German government) and slightly fewer people (77 percent) thought the UN should talk with proscribed terrorist groups (74 percent for the government).

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the higher stakes involved, the least popular form of engagement was negotiation with both armed groups and proscribed terrorist organizations. Notwithstanding, the results indicate a greater level of public appetite for non-military forms of engagement with proscribed groups than expected, particularly when presented as a strategy to further peace.

Chart 6 Support for engagement with proscribed terrorist groups to further peace



Public attitudes in Northern Ireland

The conflict in Northern Ireland killed around 3,600 people over more than 30 years. The conflict arose from opposing views of the area's status, but has its roots in centuries of political and religious differences. People in Northern Ireland thus understand first hand the long, difficult and on-going process of building peace. Their responses to the questions were therefore of particular interest.

The survey indicated the following about public views in Northern Ireland:

1. People better understand the long-term nature of peacebuilding and conflict resolution.

- 79 percent of respondents in Northern Ireland understand peacebuilding as a 'long-term process of rebuilding relationships, changing attitudes, and establishing fairer institutions' (compared to 68 percent across the UK as a whole).

2. People do not see religious belief as the primary motive for individuals to join armed groups.

- Despite the sectarian nature of the conflict, only 28 percent of respondents in Northern Ireland viewed religious beliefs as a motive to join armed groups (compared to 33 percent in the UK, 41 percent in Germany and 25 percent in the US).
- The three top motives selected were i) ideological beliefs (43 percent), ii) violent oppression by own government (35 percent), and iii) real or perceived discrimination. against their group (34 percent).

3. People agree that, in order to end violent conflict, peace processes should engage with armed, guerrilla or terrorist groups.

- 74 percent of respondents believe that a peace process that engages with armed groups can help to end violent conflict – 70 percent agreed this was also true for engagement with proscribed terrorist organizations. This was somewhat higher than the UK as a whole (64 percent and 53 percent respectively).
- 61 percent of respondents in Northern Ireland agreed that local communities should 'talk with' armed groups and 63 percent that they should 'mediate between'. This is higher than the UK-wide results (56 and 52 percent respectively).

4. People feel positively about their respective governments playing a key role in negotiating peace between or with armed groups.

We asked how people would feel knowing that their national governments had played a key role in negotiating peace between or with armed groups elsewhere in the world – giving them a list of eight emotions from which to choose.

Positive emotions significantly outranked the negative in all three countries. In the US and UK, the three most commonly cited feelings, in order of selection were: 'hopeful' (US: 49 percent, UK: 43 percent); 'proud' (US: 31 percent, UK: 29 percent); and 'happy' (US: 30 percent, UK: 22 percent). In Germany, 45 percent of respondents said they would feel 'hopeful' if they knew of their government's role in negotiating peace, 42 percent would feel 'confident' and 23 percent 'proud'. Strongly negative feelings ('afraid,' 'angry' and 'disgusted') scored very low in all the selections (under 6 percent).

Labels matter

We also tested whether people agree that 'peace processes that engage with armed groups can

help to end violent conflict'. To see how the use of different terms affects public support, the survey sample was split into three to test the following labels: 'armed groups,' 'guerrilla groups,' and 'terrorists'.

The results show that the labelling of armed groups matters when it comes to perceptions of the prospects for peace. When the question is asked in relation to 'armed groups' the public is more likely to agree with the statement (64 percent in the UK, 56 percent in the US). When asked in relation to 'terrorists', the figure dropped (to 53 percent in the UK and 46 percent in the US). German respondents appeared more agnostic – 50 percent for armed groups and 41 percent for terrorists – with the remainder split fairly evenly between those who neither agree nor disagree, and those that disagree. The UK and US results in particular indicate that over-use of the label 'terrorist' for armed groups in the media and public statements may undermine the significant public support for peacebuilding highlighted by the survey.

Chart 7 Labels matter



Conclusions

Knowing the high level of public understanding of and sympathy for peacebuilding and engaging with armed groups should encourage those working in peacebuilding and conflict prevention efforts in the UK, US and Germany to better articulate what it is, why it matters to a broader public, and to show it works. The results can be used to encourage more active public support for peacebuilding and more confident support for it from governments.

Understanding how the public justifies its support for peacebuilding – primarily arguments of rights and fairness – is valuable information for strategies to build up this public support. The fact that the public in the US, UK and Germany understand that quick wins and high-level deals cannot rebuild societies and relationships broken by conflict, and that efforts need to be long-term to help transform attitudes, relationships and institutions, is vital insight for that effort.

The survey results should also prompt further and more nuanced thinking about the policies and regulations that regulate and determine the types and nature of engagement with armed groups. The list of armed groups prohibited through international blacklists has grown, and yet so have conflicts and insecurity. That the public should express predominantly positive and hopeful feelings about the prospect of contacts and dialogue with armed groups to further peace is a helpful impetus for more strategic thinking in this area.

Finally, the public view of peacebuilding as an inclusive endeavor, ‘involving everyone from communities to governments working to end fighting and prevent the recurrence of violence’ is an encouraging sign of unity at a time of heightened polarization and internal tension in our own societies. It is a prompt to shift the emphasis away from top-down solutions to building peace through collective effort.



Conciliation Resources is an independent international organization working with people in conflict to prevent violence, resolve conflicts and promote peaceful societies. We take what we learn to government decision-makers and others working to end conflict, to improve policies and peacebuilding practice worldwide.

Further information:

☎ +44 (0)20 7359 7728

✉ cr@c-r.org

🌐 www.c-r.org

🐦 CRbuildpeace

📘 ConciliationResources

Conciliation Resources

Burghley Yard
106 Burghley Road
London NW5 1AL
United Kingdom

Charity registered in England and Wales (1055436). Company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales (03196482).

The Alliance for Peacebuilding is a US-based organization and the institutional home for the peacebuilding community – a network of over 100 organizations working to resolve conflict and create sustainable peace in 153 countries.

Further information:

☎ +1 202.822.2047

✉ afp-info@allianceforpeacebuilding.org

🌐 www.allianceforpeacebuilding.org

🐦 AfPeacebuilding

Alliance for Peacebuilding
1800 Massachusetts Ave NW
Suite 401
Washington, DC 20036
United States

